

## AND LEVINAS CREATED A CONTROVERSY ABOUT WOMEN

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Feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray and Catherine Chalié have criticized Emmanuel Levinas for his ideas about women and femininity. They maintain that Levinas essentializes female characteristics and subordinates the feminine role to the private domain, while granting the masculine dominion over the public realm. A feminist reading of these role distinctions evidences a problematic level of sexual inequality. Irigaray's primary assertion is that Levinas delegitimizes the importance of female sexual pleasure. Chalié believes that Levinas confines the ethical responsibility of women to childbearing. Given Levinas' contextual understanding of female roles, which is grounded primarily in the Bible, I find myself unconvinced by Irigaray's and Chalié's arguments.

In "Judaism and the Feminine," Levinas illustrates his belief in his concept of the home through an explanation of the crucial roles played by female characters in the Bible. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the word home as referring to a concept, in addition to a physical place. One needs food, warmth and physical protection that a residential structure provides. These are the prerequisites that enable one to cultivate "the warmth of intimacy" and "the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 150) and thus relate to a transcendental and finite other. Feminine existence resides in this realm. In order for the harshness of the outside world to "return to the peace and ease of being at home,

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the strange gentleness must enter into the geometry of infinite and cold space." Women create this strange gentleness. For example, the progression of numerous biblical events occurred as a result of female figures' "watchful lucidity, the firmness of their determination, and their cunning and spirit of sacrifice" (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p.31). The deeds of these women were great because they acted out of sheer righteousness, through a "secret presence, on the edge of invisibility" (Levinas, DF p. 31). They did not seek to showcase their strength for the sake of gaining public recognition. As a result, these figures were able to penetrate "the depths and opacity of reality, [draw] the very dimensions of interiority and mak[e] the worlds precisely inhabitable" (Levinas, DF p.31).

Levinas interprets the Talmudic phrase, "The house is woman," (Levinas, DF p. 31) to mean that women and men occupy different spiritual and social roles. A woman "makes the public life of man possible" by creating a particular "moral paradigm" (Levinas, DF p.32) within the home. The paradigm in response to the one created by men. The male realm, which exists outside of the home, is one of "hard and cold" reason. (Levinas, DF p.32). It "offers ... no inner refuge ... is disoriented, solitary and wandering, and even as such is already alienated by the products it had helped to create" (Levinas, DF p. 33). While this masculine essence, or "virility," (Levinas, DF p. 33) is necessary for society to develop, it alone cannot sustain civilization. It needs to be able to find solace in a home. I would maintain that his placement of the feminine role in the realm of home does not suggest a subjugation of the feminine.

Levinas emphasizes the total interdependency of male and female roles upon each other. His explanation that men and women complete each other not "as a part completes another into a whole, but, as it were, as two totalities complete one another" (Levinas, DF

p. 35) is biblically based, as he refers to the Talmudic discussion between Rav and Shmuel over Eve's creation from Adam's rib. The essential idea that Levinas draws out from their discussion is that the "identity of nature between man and woman, an identity of destiny and dignity, and also a subordination of sexual life to the personal relation" (Levinas, DF p.35). He believes, as the Bible instructs, that ethical behavior is more important than sexuality and, even maternity.

Luce Irigaray finds Levinas' lack of concern with sexual pleasure very problematic. She maintains that Levinas defines women's sexuality only in accordance with modesty, in that it "sustains desire , ... rekindles pleasure" (Irigaray, p.110). In so doing, he denies the importance of erotic satisfaction and pleasure of women. She claims that Levinas' understanding is clouded by his own male paradigm, which causes him to dictate female sexuality on the basis of *jouissance*, or "masculine pleasure" (Irigaray, p.109). She laments the change from the goddess tradition, when "female sexual organs always appear in the representations of the bodies of women, particularly goddesses" (Irigaray, p. 109). She suggests that as the masculine hegemony of society developed, these images, and the acceptance of female sexuality that they represented, were suppressed. She implies that Levinas shares the ideas of those patriarchal figures who support repressing female sexuality. She also celebrates an eroticism which results in "the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space" (Irigaray, p. 111) and criticizes Levinas for not understanding the importance of such relations.

Irigaray's emphasis on sexuality does not seem to be mir-

rored in Levinas' discussions. While Levinas does address sexual issues, he clearly voices the biblical view that they should be subordinated to ethical ones. In his essay "And God Created Woman," Levinas analyzes the significance of the seemingly unnecessary repetition of the letter yod in the word *vayetzer*, or made. One of the many reasons the Talmud gives for the unusual spelling is that it represents the conflict within human nature between instinctual desires and obligations towards the Torah, or towards law in general. Humans are constantly forced to choose between fulfilling "the healthy desires of a creature that hungers, what Pascal called concupiscence, what we might call the erotic" (Levinas, NTR p.166) and the Law. What distinguishes humans from animals, according to the Talmud, is that they can choose to obey laws and a Creator. It is man's "obedience which defines him" (Levinas, NTR p.166) as well as the quality and sense of order that exists in his life. Levinas does not deny the importance of sexual desire. He maintains, however, that human beings, as opposed to animals, cannot succumb to every desire absolutely. His assertions are based directly on passages from Tractate *Berachot*.

Levinas also analyzes the Talmudic discussion on the ambiguity of Eve's creation. The events surrounding Eve's creation have proven to be quite problematic for feminists who believe that the subjugation of women throughout history began with this story. Levinas is acutely aware of this difficulty. He fashions his reading of the Talmud around discrediting the notion that women were created with an inherently inferior status. His justification is entirely Talmudic. While the Bible states that Eve was formed from Adam's rib, Talmudic rabbis argue about whether such an image is literal, or whether it refers to Adam's face or tail. The literal translation suggests that since woman was created from a body part that is

necessary for both sexes, she "is not merely the female of man," but "she belongs to the human" (Levinas, NTR p.169). The Talmudic rabbis who support the translation of rib as a face can be understood as "[positing] a perfect equality between the feminine and the masculine" that infuses within male / female relationships a sense of "equal dignity" (Levinas, NTR p.169). The rabbis in the Talmud who understand that rib refers to the tail imply that the creation of woman was a deliberate act on the part of the Creator. G-d did not simply allow woman to emerge "through natural evolution, from a lost bone of man," but rather, He changed a part of man to create woman. G-d wanted woman to exist and therefore "she came forth from a real act of creation" (Levinas, NTR p.169). Levinas believes that indicates that "it is not woman who is secondary; it is the relationship with woman that is secondary; it is the relationship with woman as woman that does not belong to what is fundamentally human" (Levinas, NTR, p.169). It is not G-d or the Bible which creates society's negative attitude towards women, but the actions of the people within society.

Levinas' failure to discuss the intricacies of either male or female erotic experiences is not because Levinas "knows nothing of communion in pleasure" nor because he has never "experienced the transcendence of the other which becomes im-mediate ecstasy in me and with him - or her," (Irigaray, p. 110) as Irigaray so boldly suggests. It is because, as he states explicitly, that "the sexual is only an accessory of the human" (Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, p. 170). Humanity is "responsible for the universe" (Levinas, NTR p. 170) and Levinas is much more concerned with the spiritual ramifications for both men and women in fulfilling this responsibility than he is about either gender fulfilling sexual desires. Levinas asserts that man is responsible for his actions towards others, towards

women. Levinas believes that it is much more productive to study how man treats this responsibility through his behavior in society, than it is to use his sexual behavior as a barometer for his general attitudes. Levinas, much to the dismay of Irigaray, clearly states that "it is not the acuteness of libidinous desire that, in itself, would explain the soul" (Levinas, NTR p.170). He endeavors to "challenge ... the revolution which thinks it has achieved the ultimate by destroying the family so as to liberate imprisoned sexuality" (Levinas, NTR p. 170). He explicitly rejects "the claim of accomplishing on the sexual plane the real liberation of man" (Levinas, NTR p.170). Levinas believes that the exploration of one's ethical responsibility is a more appropriate method of probing the human psyche.

Irigaray further chides Levinas for emphasizing the "experience of love" (Irigaray, p.111) rather than the erotic pleasure that results when two lovers "enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons becomes indistinct" (Irigaray, p.111). For Levinas, such an effacement of the alterity between two persons represents a type of violence. Throughout his works, he expresses his objection to viewing others of extensions of ourselves, "as alien objects to be manipulated for the advantage of the individual or social self," (Levinas, TI p. 12) or as an "object to be subsumed under one of my categories and given a place in my world" (Levinas, TI p. 13). He rejects this totalizing, Hegelian merging of self and other that characterizes Irigaray's ultimate sexual experience.

Catherine Chaliier contends that Levinas' distinction between the masculine and the feminine - virility and the home - is demeaning towards women. She explores the ramifications of Levinas' prioritization of ethics over ontology. For Levinas, "the endeavor that each being makes to persevere in his own being" (Chaliier, p. 120) or *conatus* is an active, difficult struggle. Engaging in such a struggle

towards the unfolding of our being is quite necessary and "we must find in this strength 'the very virility of the universal and conquering logos'" (Chalier, p.121). The unfolding of a woman's being exists in her ability to combat the alienation that results from *conatus*, to "answer to a solitude inside this privation and ... to a solitude that subsists in spite of the presence of G-d; to a solitude in the universal, to the inhuman which continues to well up even when the human has mastered nature and raised it to thought" (Levinas, DF p.33). Chalier's difficulty with such an interpretation is that it essentializes feminine characteristics as being nurturing and passive: "the feminine function is not to create," (Chalier, p.123) but rather to simply to respond to masculine behavior. Since the feminine bears the responsibility of restoring the moral state of being of the universe, feminine action becomes "both an ontological category and an ethical paradigm" (Chalier, p. 123). Chalier interprets this to mean that the feminine is only "a condition of ethics" that is excluded from "the highest destiny of human being" (Chalier, p.123). This destiny "would be reserved for the masculine once it has been converted to ethics thanks to the feminine," (Chalier, p. 123) while women would have to content themselves with "being a mother and nothing else" (Chalier, p. 127).

I do not understand why Chalier assumes that masculine virility is inherently better than the feminine. Levinas does not seem to make these value judgments nor does he prioritize one realm above another. It seems to me that the only reason virility is seen as superior is because it is attributed to the masculine realm. Wouldn't it be just as great an injustice towards women had the feminine realm been described as overpowering, solitary and alienating, one from which they needed to find shelter from within the male realm? Furthermore, Chalier's assertion that Levinas conflates female ethi-

cal responsibility and ontological destiny seems misplaced. Levinas describes one's unfulfillable obligation towards the other as pretemporal, and more importantly, as universal. No one is exempt from their responsibility towards the other and women do not get off the hook by having children. Chalier's discussion of the matriarch Rebecca as "a biblical figure of the feminine" (Chalier, p. 127) testifies to this and I would think that Levinas would completely agree with her example. Rebecca tends to Abraham's servant, Eliezer, and to his camels when he stops at her well in search of a suitable wife for Isaac. In her kindness, Rebecca demonstrates the importance of fulfilling her "responsibility for this stranger" (Chalier, p. 127) and is thus chosen to wed Isaac. She adds to the fulfillment of her ethical duty through this act, even though it does not involve bearing children.

Irigaray and Chalier discuss several important issues within Levinas' work. Irigaray finds Levinas lacking in sensitivity towards female sexuality. She accuses him of contributing to a masculine paradigm that prevents erotic pleasure for women, while preserving it for men. Chalier believes that Levinas' concept of the feminine prevents women from attaining the same ethical destiny as he affords to men. Levinas' own arguments seem to stem not from a desire to oppress women, nor from a belief in the inherent superiority of men. Rather, Levinas grounds his arguments in biblical exegesis. His understanding of social and sexual gender roles through the lens of Talmudic discussions and decisions results in a less politically acceptable, but in my opinion, a more insightful philosophy.



## WORKS CITED

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